SOUTHEAST ASIAN-PACIFIC FRAMEWORKS: WHAT DO THEY FRAME AND WHAT WORK DO THEY DO?

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A paper drafted to stimulate discussion at a roundtable on
"Old Wine, New Bottles? Regional Frameworks in the Asia-Pacific"
at the 47th Strategy for Peace Conference, Stanley Foundation,
Airlie Center, Warrenton, Virginia, 19-21 October 2006

Although these pages feature Southeast Asia, our topic is spatially far-flung. Pictured as sets of participating countries highlighted on a map of the world, regional and inter-regional frameworks that include some or all of Southeast Asia run a vast and complex gamut of partly concentric and partly overlapping yet distinctive and sometimes changing memberships or attendances. MALSINDO[1] spans three contiguous Southeast Asian states. ASEAN[2] encompasses all ten. ASEM[3] is inter-regional. FPDA[4] offers a fourth pattern, linking as it does two adjacent Southeast Asian countries with three distant partners—two in the far-southern Pacific, one in far-western Europe. The hub-and-spoke dialogue arrangements known collectively as ASEAN Plus One illustrate a fifth schema.

A sixth variation on our roundtable's theme is ASEAN Plus Three, or APT: the acquisition by ASEAN of a huge northeast Asian fringe meant to represent and activate an East Asian region in which Southeast Asia is a vanguard sub-region—demographically smaller that its northern periphery yet (as of now, still) ensconced in the "driver's seat" of that newer and far larger vehicle. (APEC[5] is similar, but it lacks a vanguard, although that could change should, e.g., a US administration someday decide—and be able!—to play that role, as occurred on Blake Island in 1993.) Also vanguarded by Southeast Asia in a seventh distinctive arrangement is ARF,[6] whose extension beyond ASEAN is not regional but instead verges on being global. The latest acronym in this series is the East Asia Summit, or EAS. And that venue embodies an eighth possibility: the selective and controversial augmenting of East Asia with three new members only one of which—India—is irrefutably "Asian."

These seven configurations—sub-regional (MALSINDO), regional (ASEAN), inter-regional (ASEM), selectively-sub-and-extra-regional (FPDA), regional-hub-and-spoked (ASEAN + 1), super-regionally concentric (APT, APEC), selectively-enlarged-extra-regional (ARF), and selectively-enlarged-super-regional (EAS)—do not exhaust the logically possible ways of "frameworking" states inside and beyond "regions." Note, for instance, that none of these experiments is comprehensively "Asian" in composition. Will a meta-regional frame someday group, say, APT, SAARC,[7] and SCO?[8] (And if that

[1] A barebones framework to coordinate surveillance of the Malacca (Melaka) Strait by Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia.
[2] The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of course.
[3] The Asia-Europe Meeting.
[4] The Five-Power Defence Arrangement.
[5] The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.
[6] The ASEAN Regional Forum.
[7] The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

bit of political science fiction ever is inaugurated—or even approximated—will it threaten US interests or merely stagnate somewhere between banality and incoherence?)

Note also that these acronyms all populate a single track—Track I. If we broaden our scope to cover Tracks II and III, the challenges for analysis and policy become even more daunting: akin to playing multiple three-dimensional chess games simultaneously—or to adding bits, chunks, and combinations of variously "regional" meatballs to the already complex spaghetti-bowl effect associated with rampantly bilateral FTAs. And I haven't even mentioned dyadic arrangements, or tried to differentiate regional frameworks by their internal decision rules, self-ascribed functions, or sectoral relevance—for trade, technology, education, the environment, and so on—including whether, to what extent, and how they have solved actual problems in, or had any impact on, the "real world."

My purpose here is not taxonomic. Ours is not an academic event. But the matter of practical relevance is worth discussing. It is, indeed, the first of four among the many questions of policy that our roundtable could usefully entertain: (1) Are regional frameworks mere *talk shops*? (2) Should they deepen their *domestic involvements*? (3) Are participating governments drowning in *alphabet soup*? And: (4) What should *US policy* regarding these arrangements be?

Even though they only touch the surface of what we could discuss, these questions warrant, I hope, the following remarks. Before making them, however, I want to share one result of a small practical-reality check of my own.

I began writing this paper a week shy of October on a flight back from Southeast Asia. While in the region I assigned myself a bit of pre-Airlie Center homework. I asked several informants—Southeast Asians intimately acquainted with regional frameworks and what they (don't) do—what "burning issues" regarding regionalism mostly urgently deserved consideration.

I was especially struck by two very different, almost polar answers. A Philippine scholar gave highest priority to the need to explore ways of ensuring that ASEAN remained the "driver" of regionalism in East Asia. This expert feared, above all, the loss of local control over a process that had spiralled well beyond Southeast Asia—and thus beyond ASEAN's original purview. In contrast, a Thai policymaker recommended priority attention to the tendency of globalization to reinforce or widen inequalities between and within ASEAN member societies.

I was struck, too, by the academic's choice of a policy problem, while the official expressed a more academic, or at any rate a more abstractly conceptual concern for "globalization." This seeming reversal of recommendations compared with roles could be a mere coincidence. But it raises a larger possibility: that decades of interaction on regionalism by scholars and officials may have socialized each to the other's perspective.

Traditionally Track II has been defined in terms of Track I—as an opportunity for government employees to let their hair down for the benefit of discussion. Less evident is a reverse effect of prolonged mutual exposure—Track II as an incentive for university

[8] The Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

and thank-tank employees to put their hair up for the benefit of governments. And comparably two-way questions implicate Track III: Are ostensibly non-governmental voices being coopted into thinking more like officials, or are the latter learning from the former? Appropriation occurs in both directions, clearly, but with what net consequences for which policies in which sectors?

The latest coup in Thailand has rendered these queries more acute. In recent years ASEAN has taken steps—however few, small, and hesitant—that point away from sovereignty-respecting abstention toward (still distant) democracy-upholding intervention. That augurs well for Track III and its legitimacy in Track I eyes. Yet insofar as "people power" in Bangkok stimulated the unconstitutional overthrow of a democratically elected government and the unilateral abrogation of a democratic constitution, Track III could suffer by association, in this case, not only with instability but with a curtailment—temporary, one hopes—of democracy as well. Or perhaps the apparent role of the monarchy, at least the Privy Council, in the Thai drama will render this case *sui generis*, and thus limit any wider disillusionment with democracy.

Relevant, too, in this context is how both of my informants' otherwise different worries—ASEAN's precarious centrality to regionalism and globalization's perverse impact on the region—underscored the vulnerability of Southeast Asia. The Thai coup and its repercussions may, at least in the short run, increase that sense of exposure and uncertainty. And that could reduce the already modest enthusiasm in ASEAN circles for Wilsonian democracy over Westphalian security in Southeast Asia.

In any event, the "driver's seat" issue serves to introduce the first of my four proposed questions for discussion:

Talk shops?

In the run-up to ASEAN's 40th birthday next August, official speeches will celebrate its longevity and its reputation for success. In that light it may seem churlish to ask: What is the point of regionalism? Yet it is because of the apparent permanence of the Association that once can wonder whether it has become, in near-middle age, at least as much of an end in itself—an embodiment of regionalism that warrants protection and solicitude—as a means toward ends outside itself—improving the "real world" in which Southeast Asians live their lives.

Consider two different cases for keeping ASEAN ensconced in the driver's seat of regionalism. One can justify retaining the *primus inter pares* status of ASEAN inside ARF, APT, and EAS as necessary to assuage ASEAN's need to feel indispensable and its fear of losing control of regionalism as a process. Or one can do so from conviction that ASEAN's centrality in the process will help solve the actual problems, or at least alleviate the tensions, that bedevil Northeast Asia.

For many years Western policy analysts have criticized ASEAN for being a talk shop instead of a workshop—for elevating process above result, preferring declarations to accomplishments, privileging consensus over reform. Formerly, such critics would be rebuked by the Association's enthusiasts for expecting too much too soon. Respect for

member sovereignty and the stress on process were not shortcomings, in this view. They were virtues of an "ASEAN way" that took inauspicious local conditions into account.

Had these Western critics already forgotten *Konfrontasi*—Indonesia's war of words and infiltrations against Malaysia in the 1960s—and the ominous shadow it had cast over Southeast Asia' future? Had they forgotten the destabilizing potential of the dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines over Sabah? The risk of a regional power vacuum opening up to China's advantage following the British withdrawal from "east of Suez" and the American exit from Indochina? Or the threat posed by Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia?

Without ASEAN and the intramural amity it had fostered, it was said, Southeast Asia would have been divided, vulnerable, and unable to meet these challenges. As an alternative to fighting, talking in this perilous context deserved not ridicule but respect. Not to mention the relevance of the earlier, colonial past: Societies that had been forced to diverge—pulled onto disparate historical tracks—by rival European powers beginning in the 16th century needed, first and foremost, to become less suspicious of each other. In that perspective as well, getting acquainted in intramural conversations—joining a talk shop—made eminent sense. The "ASEAN Way" made a virtue of this necessity by upholding member sovereignty to the point of constraining collective and therefore controversial action.

Times have changed. A younger generation of Southeast Asians lacks corroborating experiences—of colonial divergence prior to independence, or of regional turbulence immediately thereafter. ASEAN's founding members have had nearly four decades to get to know one another. Southeast Asia's "long peace" has sapped credibility in the risk of war as a reason for elevating acquaintance over achievement. Deference to member sovereignty has also been eroded by democratization, especially Indonesia's, and by globalization, including exposure to international norms meant to foster effective but also accountable rule.

Nowadays the "ASEAN Way" is invoked almost as rarely as "Asian values." And both may sound like lame excuses to Southeast Asians who are disturbed and embarrassed by what they see today in their region: an enduringly brutal junta in Myanmar; the malfunctioning of democracy in the Philippines and Thailand; and the combination of unwillingness and inability that has kept ASEAN from taking steps necessary to help end the perennial trans-border air pollution from fires in Indonesia, or help stop strife-torn East Timor from becoming a failed state.

If the European Union once exemplified for ASEAN's fans what their own Association was not—not bureaucratic, or legalistic, or micromanaging, and not presumptuously requiring members to be democratic—now in ASEAN circles one regularly hears comments to the effect that the maturation of regionalism in Southeast Asia has made a "European" path more attractive. Interest in strengthening the ASEAN Secretariat is one case in point.

Domestic involvements?

Analysts often distinguish two ways in which a region can be built: by *regionalization*, or by *regionalism*. Regionalization is the bottom-up result of a host of individual initiatives—typically economic decisions, made by entrepreneurs, that increase regional flows of trade and investment. Regionalism, in contrast, operates top-down through policies decided by regional-member governments—arrangements negotiated by officials on behalf of economic cooperation but also, and notably, regional security.

How, if at all, does democracy fit into this distinction? An initial response might be that it does not fit: Transnational flows of information and strategies of activism across ASEAN-member societies could enlarge the zone of democracy in Southeast Asia, in a political version of bottom-up regionalization. In practice, however, democracy is unlikely to succeed except nationally: inside a given country, based on local conditions, and as a goal of domestic actors who need have no regional agenda in mind.

As for official regionalism inducing political pluralism and competition in a member country from the outside, any effort by ASEAN, or by any of its already democratic members, to democratize a recalcitrant fellow member, such as Myanmar, would likely fail and could trigger a backlash sufficient to endanger regional peace. Facing pressure from ASEAN to step aside, the generals in Yangon would sooner disaffiliate than comply. Myanmar outside the tent would be more willing to ignore the concerns of those still inside. And if their backs really were to the wall, the generals might react in destabilizing ways. In this line of thought, external security trumps internal accountability, and ASEAN's original—foundational—obeisance to member sovereignty is reaffirmed.

ASEAN's maturation has partly undercut this argument. As war, between members or between them and outsiders, has become less and less thinkable over time, the "thinkability" of a more innovative regional agenda has increased. *Konfrontasi* has morphed from a spectre into an excuse. Yet the specifics of just how democratization might rise on that agenda remain unclear and underexamined.

Under one possible scenario, the projected ASEAN Charter and ASEAN Security Community could incorporate democracy more explicitly into official regional doctrine. Actually making membership conditional on accountable government, let alone civil liberties, would remain virtually inconceivable. But a rhetorical legitimation of democratic values might prove useful as a precedent and rationale for marginally increasing Track I pressures on Yangon. And if the recent decision to discuss Myanmar in the Security Council in New York were to presage more UN involvement, some ASEAN governments, notably Indonesia, might not want the Association to appear laggard by comparison. This scenario could be enhanced by parallel developments on Track III, as civil society organizations mount pressure on their respective governments to give the junta less and less slack.

Yet even this modest sequence of events may be too rosy. Political liberalization as a regional priority could easily fall prey to a realist calculation by ASEAN's other members that further alienating the Burmese junta would only drive it deeper into China's embrace. Especially if post-coup Thailand incorporates a military (or military-cum-palace) veto over civilian politics, Bangkok may become that much less inclined to

champion civilianization at the risk of disorder next door—and Thailand vis à vis Myanmar is the crucial "front-line" state. Nor, farther afield, has Washington's misguided and so-far disastrous experiment in Iraq been kind to faith that democracy can be induced from outside.

As for outrage mounting on Track III to the point of influencing Track I, the attention spans of social activists with urgent local concerns may not be wide enough to encompass the Association's westernmost member. And even if they did champion change in Myanmar, through what regional mechanism could that proposed shift in priorities be effectively conveyed to ASEAN's leaders? One might have thought the ASEAN People's Assembly, or APA, could have played that role. Yet at the risk of cynicism, one could argue that APA's ostensible function as the grass-roots conscience of ASEAN has been more symbolic than real.

Some of ASEAN's members are, in any case, anything but democratic. Faced with recommendations conducive to regime change in Myanmar, they would wonder for whom the bell tolls. Striking in this context is how little attention has been paid inside ASEAN to devising "minus-X" arrangements that would allow a subset of the membership to take the lead on subjects where no consensus yet exists. Institutional reform along such lines could lend a second meaning to "flexible engagement"—flexibility not only regarding Myanmar but also in no longer limiting what the Association can do to what its most sovereignty-minded members will allow.

In this connection, did Yangon's declining to take its scheduled turn as chair of ASEAN's Standing Committee augur further reform, or merely sidestep the issue and postpone facing it?

Alphabet soup?

ASEAN's longevity and prominence notwithstanding, the relevant alphabet soup has many more than five letters. And that raises at least two more questions: Have frameworks in the wider region proliferated way beyond utility? And whose utility should be borne in mind?

I have argued that, over time, the workshop-not-talk-shop criterion for framework success once favored by Western critics is now common to discussions of regionalism on both sides of the Pacific. Before applying that standard, however, an action-demanding Western analyst might do well to understand how the geostrategic weakness of their neighborhood still inclines more than a few Southeast Asians to view regional arrangements less as proactive mechanisms for resolving specific difficulties—terrorism, trafficking, piracy, contagion, pollution, and the like—than as networks of symbolic assurance against local damage from rivalry among bigger powers or hegemony by any one of them.

No Southeast Asian state has nuclear weapons, so far as is known. Although ASEAN's defense ministers met for the first time this year, the "ASEAN Armed Forces" do not exist. Analysts who live and work in the US, a country that is (still) able to alter the world, are well advised to remember that a "can do" spirit presupposes a "can do"

capacity. Not everyone is equally well equipped to implement Nike's parochially American advice to "just do it."

Apt in this context is Singaporean analyst Simon Tay's notion of what might be called "default regionalism," ASEAN-style, in East Asia.[9] My take on his idea is that Southeast Asia does not recommend itself as the vanguard of spin-off frameworks—ARF, APT, EAS—from confidence that it deserves the lead position. Rather that role falls to ASEAN by default, because Northeast Asian states cannot get their act together to address and resolve their disputes. It is precisely the *in*confidence of ASEAN that leads it to cling to the driver's seat in these processes.

Northeast Asian states, and the United States, may someday chafe at the anomaly of a southern driver almost as distant from the DMZ as it is from the Taiwan Straits, to the point of substituting a Northeast Asian frame, or at any rate a Northern Pacific one. If the Six-Party Talks succeed on North Korea—so far they have not—they might someday replace ASEAN as a driver of East Asian or pan-Pacific security. In the meantime, however, ASEAN's default regionalist lead will remain too useful, as a least worst option, to be challenged.

That said, it may be instructive to compare these and other frameworks by their positive accomplishments. (Remarkably and perhaps tellingly, in the literature, such comparisons are very hard to find.) Setting the 39-year-old ASEAN aside, consider these newer clumps in the alphabet soup, all added since 1989: APA, APEC, APT, ARF, ASEM (the Asia-Europe Meeting), and EAS. For purposes of discussion, I would rank these frameworks—tentatively, roughly, and, no doubt, controversially—in three descending bands from most to least effective: (1) APT; (2) APEC and ARF; and (3) APA, ASEM, and EAS.

I would not read too much into this list. Some of the economic activities associated with APT—innovating East Asian financial and currency arrangements, drawing China even more deeply into the regional economy—reflect the activation of a fully East Asian frame more than the actual work of APT-as-such. On the latter, narrower score, the arrangement's record has been less impressive. And just as the speed of APT's take-off may not be sustainable over time, APEC's loss of momentum is in principle reversible, especially if the US takes it more seriously as a site for serious negotiations on trade and development.

As for ARF, the Northeast Asian security problems it was meant to address are uniquely intractable compared with many of the socioeconomic and technical issues on other networks' agendas. That ASEAN's leaders have more or less ignored APA is not wholly the latter's fault. Likewise, the stagnation of ASEM may be less an organizational failure than a function of Europe's and Asia's preoccupation with other matters, including their respective relations with the US. EAS is not even a year old. Should a baby be charged with failure to act like an adult?

[9] Simon SC Tay, "An East Asia Community and the United States: A View from ASEAN," paper for a workshop organized by the Council on East Asian Community, Tokyo, June 2006, pp. 2, 20, 25.

I invite and look forward to other assessments and arguments by colleagues at the roundtable. And however these frameworks are ranked, the people who manage them appear, for the most part, to have understood the need to move beyond atmospherics toward on-the-ground achievements as the appropriate measure of success.[10] The one clear exception to this rule is EAS, a distinctively high proportion of whose actors probably would prefer that it remain a talk shop—a viewpoint that redefines any future failure by that body to do much of anything into a sure sign of its success.

US policy?

Multi-, bi-, and unilateralisms are not mutually exclusive alternatives. American foreign policy in an area as vast and complex as the Asia Pacific will, necessarily, at any given time, include all three kinds of statements and actions. These formats are choices of *method*, not content. It is true that the larger number of parties involved, other things being equal, the greater the chance of a low-common-denominator outcome. But across multiple disparate issue-areas, other things are almost never equal.

One of these variable things, of course, is the nature of the challenge or opportunity being addressed. Sticking to a single method regardless of the objective to be reached or the problem to be solved amounts to imitating the idiot who looks for his car keys only under a street lamp because that's where the light is. Another thing that almost always varies is the extent to which the enlistment of others in a multilateral process is itself a desired outcome that could—partly, wholly, or more than—compensate for a statement or action whose content is, from a unilateralist standpoint, second or even third best. Nor should we overlook the possibility of American benefit in the other direction, when merely by joining others in a process, the US thus earns needed credit from them, while also gaining useful knowledge of (and from) them. An outright, across-the-board aversion to talk shops, and thus to talking shop, means rejecting these possible benefits in advance, regardless of the case at hand.

Talking shop can indeed be a waste of time. Woody Allen's famous remark that 80 to 90 percent of success in life is "just showing up" was an exaggeration. But sometimes just showing up, even if only to talk, can have at least a marginally beneficial effect. And this marginal benefit has, in principle, been enlarged by the Bush administration's catastrophic unilateralism in the Middle East and the related global delegitimation of US policy. In this dire context, talk seems cheap. Except that their Iraqi (and increasingly now also Afghan and Pakistani) preoccupations, of course, have shrunk the attention spans of policymakers in Washington, and thereby raised the professional opportunity cost of talking (and listening) in places far from Iraq, including East Asia.

Speaking of attention spans, I hope that next month, when Congress reconvenes after the mid-term elections, the House of Representatives will pass a bill to match the United States Ambassador for ASEAN Affairs Act adopted last month by the Senate. The plan is to add this duty to the already full portfolio of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State

[10] An extreme instance of this shift may be found in the *Final Report of the East Asia Study Group*, submitted to the APT Summit in Phnom Penh on 4 November 2002. The word "concrete" (as in "concrete steps" and "concrete progress") occurs 23 different times in the six double-spaced, wide-margin pages of the document's Executive Summary.

for East and the Pacific. That may suffice for now, but eventually, and especially insofar as ASEAN remains central to East Asian and Pacific regionalisms, the US should consider upgrading this responsibility. The post should be considered more than a mere sop to ASEAN. Not least among the proposed ambassador's responsibilities should be the continuous coverage and assessment of ASEAN-related regional initiatives to determine their effectiveness and pertinence to US interests broadly understood, including the extent to which those interests may dovetail with East Asian-Pacific ones in potentially win-win results.

Then there is APEC. This framework has languished since the heady moments when the Clinton administration capped it with a summit on Blake Island off Seattle in 1993—and when, in Bogor the year after, this APEC Economic Leaders Meeting (AELM) promised free trade in two leaps forward, by 2010 and 2020. No expert I know is persuaded, by the progress made to date, that these goals will be achieved.

What should the US do? Many answers come to mind, too many to explore one by one here. Suffice it instead to note them down and invite their discussion at the roundtable:

Regarding APEC, the US could

(1) ignore the group, downgrade the AELM, and deflect pressure on the US president to attend;

(2) ignore the group and use its summits only as occasions for bilateral meetings on the side, between the US president and selected other leaders who are there;

(3) try to rally the group to a counter-terrorist agenda (as attempted by President Bush at the Bangkok AELM in 2003) while downgrading APEC's economic potential;

(4) commit time and resources to reviving the group, but less for economic than for strategic reasons, as a framework to enhance American influence in East Asia and Asia Pacific and thus to counterbalance APT as a vehicle for China;

(5) negotiate seriously on both trade and development issues in APEC in search of win-win regional agreements independent of the fate endangered Doha round; or

(6) help revive the group mainly for trade reasons, as a last-ditch way of rescuing Doha, e.g., by preparing to negotiate a package deal in APEC that would serve the Bogor goals while bypassing Europe and thus helping persuade the latter to moderate its stance on agriculture in global trade negotiations. (The similarity between this approach and Clinton's strategy in Seattle is intentional.)

Perhaps I don't need to add that some of these policies may require extending up-or-down fast-track authority on trade agreements beyond its currently scheduled expiration next July—obviously impossible prior to next month's Congressional elections and possibly unachievable in the first half of 2007.

With reference to EAS and related cooperation with ASEAN, an initial priority for the new US ambassador for ASEAN affairs might be to conduct a thorough review of the costs and benefits of supporting the Association's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, including exploring whether ASEAN could agree to accept a statement of support in lieu of an American signature on the treaty itself, insofar as the latter would require Senate approval. This is not to recommend a plaintive knock on the door of EAS. It is rather to suggest investigating just how open future American options for affiliation may be, should that become desirable in future than it is now.

Two final recommendations come to mind, one for the US and one, if I may, for ASEAN.

For the US: The proliferation of Southeast Asian-Pacific frameworks has made all the more timely a high-level review of all of them to see if and how they might advance the goals of the US and its Asian-Pacific partners. To avoid looking only under the street lamp, however, such a review should first identify those challenges and problems that are best suited to, or even require, multilateral approaches. Only then should one scan the frameworks to see whether a given framework might offer an appropriate means of responding to a given challenge, or alleviating (if not solving) a given problem.

The results of such a review may range in scale from an incremental effort to help strengthen the capacity of MALSINDO to reduce piracy in the Malacca Strait, all the way to exploring how Asia-linked imbalances in the global economy might be ameliorated using APEC as a venue for negotiation.

For ASEAN: Countries are routinely and publicly evaluated on multiple dimensions by agencies around the world. It is time to initiate a comparably open and regular evaluation of Southeast Asian-Pacific frameworks. Units already exist inside the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta for assessing whether or not a given clump in the alphabet soup—ARF, e.g., or ARF—has in fact done what it was tasked to do. These units should be strengthened, and their insider work should be complemented by regular outsider evaluations on Track III. Policy scholars in universities and think tanks around the region could help generate constructively critical assessments, including specific recommendations as to how the particular mix of talk and work in a given framework could be improved.

The ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN ISIS), as a vanguard within the larger, APT-fostered Network of East Asian Think-tanks (NEAT), could take this on as a priority, and possibly involve APA as well.

Although this paper is overlong, I know I have only scratched a few surfaces of our subject. Your knowledge of what has and has not been scratched should correct for this shortcoming in wider and deeper thinking around our conference table in Virginia.

[3 October 2006]